

The Facts About Captain Kidd's "Treasure"

By JOSEPH B. GILDER.

THERE is no legend more persistent than that of the burial of priceless treasure by Capt. William Kidd, the reputed pirate. The estimated amount hereof has been limited only by the fancy of the historian or romancer. But, liberal as most of these estimates have been, it is probable that the largest sum ever named would fail to cover the cost of the explorations made from time to time to recover some part of this supposed buried booty. From the coast of Maine to the shores of Delaware and Chesapeake bays, and still further south, credulous spades and picks have dug deep pits and trenches, by sunlight and by moonlight, under flaring torches and by the dim rays of lanterns and tallow dips. As recently as the year 1919 a lawsuit disclosed the fact that a New Jersey pastor, settled many miles from the Atlantic coast, had bought a worthless farm on the owner's assurance that beneath its infertile soil lay rich stores of gold and jewels hidden by Kidd and his companions and revealed to the seller (as usual) in a dream!

Of these tales—some of them wonderfully artistic fabrics woven by such artificers as Irving, Stevenson and Poe—nearly all have been shown to be fantastic to the last degree. But one of them has held its own to the present day, and will perhaps never be wholly disbelieved. This is the story that Kidd buried on Gardiner's Island, off the eastern end of Long Island, a great mass of gold, gold dust, jewels, silver plate and the inevitable "pieces of eight." Baseless as this legend is, and variously as it has been embellished in the process of repetition, it is far more plausible than any other of the thousand and one similar tales of treasure buried and lost, or perhaps recovered; and hence it is credited still in quarters where the other yarns no longer find ready credence.

No fact concerning Kidd is better attested, indeed, than his entrusting a considerable part of the treasure he brought home from the East Indies to the third Gardiner of the American line. But not a shilling's worth of the precious store was buried anywhere; it remained in the custody of the lord of the manor for a very brief period; every item of it was strictly accounted for and given up. And Kidd himself, as a matter of fact, never once set foot on Gardiner's Island.

The only authentic account of the supposed pirate's visit to the neighborhood is to be found in the deposition made by John Gardiner in Boston shortly after Kidd and his men were treacherously thrown into jail there. The narrative, related in the third person, is dated July 17, 1699. As here given it is slightly abridged but not otherwise altered.

Late in June (about the 27th) Kidd's counsel, Mr. Emmot of New York, went to Gardiner's house and asked for and obtained a boat to sail into New York. In the evening Gardiner saw a sloop with six guns riding off the island, and in the evening on the second day thereafter he boarded her to learn her name and destination. He was politely greeted by Capt. Kidd, "till then unknown to him," who said he was going to Lord Bellomont, Governor of New York and the greatest part of New England, who was then at Boston. Kidd "desired him to carry two negro boys and one negro girl ashore and keep them till he returned, or till his order called for them." Gardiner undertook the commission, and the next morning Kidd sent his boat ashore with two bales of goods and a negro boy.

Twenty-four hours thereafter, in response to a message, Gardiner took six sheep aboard the sloop for the voyage to Boston, and sent two of his men back to fetch a barrel of cider which Kidd "desired him to spare." While the men were away "Kidd offered Gardiner several pieces of damaged muslin and Bengal as a present to his wife, which Kidd put into a bag handed to him." When the men returned with the cider "Kidd gave them four pieces of gold for their trouble, and also bringing him wood." He also gave him "two or three pieces of dam-

aged muslin for his own use." At the same time he offered to pay for the cider, but Gardiner assured him it was already paid for by the present to the lady of the manor. Some of the sailors gave Gardiner's men "muslin for neck cloths". Gardiner then left the vessel, and when he had done so Kidd "fired four guns and stood for Block Island."

Some three days thereafter Kidd, having returned, sent for Gardiner and requested him "to take and keep for him, or order, a chest and a box of gold and a bundle of quilts and four bales of goods." Gardiner agreed to

and over 150 years elapsed before it was copied in London, sent to America and printed in the New England Historical and Genealogical Register. (Vol. VI, 1852.) Meanwhile the unwritten account of the incident which he gave to his family and friends had been so transformed as to bear no resemblance to the original version.

The legendary account appears in Munson's "History of Suffolk County" (Long Island), where it is docketed as a manuscript record found among the papers of the seventh proprietor of Gardiner's Island. It is interesting as an example of the grotesque distortion a story may undergo

ried four times and is said to have been liberal not only to his wives and children but also to their numerous kin. Kidd's unexpected visits, which put the islander's little manor on the map, doubtless afforded a welcome break in a somewhat monotonous existence—unless four marriages preclude the possibility of monotony in any man's—or woman's—life.

On July 1, 1699, Kidd sailed into Boston harbor, relying implicitly on Lord Bellomont's written assurance of protection and support. An honest man himself, it had probably never occurred to him that his partner's reassuring phrases were employed only to deceive him and that the plighted "word and honor" of this belted earl were false as a dicer's oaths. Yet such was the fact, and Bellomont afterward boasted that he had "wheedled" his victim into his clutches.

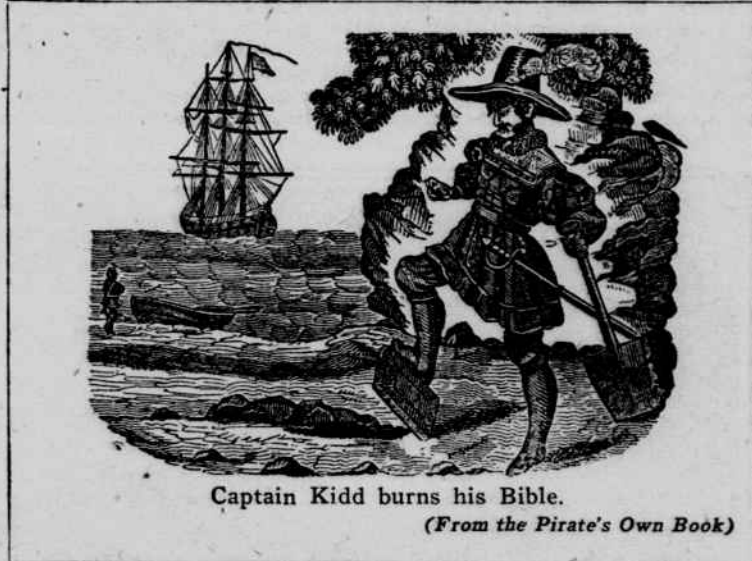
In his "wheedling" letter Bellomont had told Kidd that if he should come to Boston he would be fitted out to go to the West Indies and bring into port the ship he had taken in Indian waters. Having this assurance in mind, the captive sent his jailer to the Governor six months later to say that, if permitted to go to the place where he had left the Quedah Merchant and to St. Thomas and Curacao he would undertake to bring back goods worth £50,000 to £60,000 which otherwise would be lost. "To remove from me any jealousy of his trying to escape," wrote Bellomont, Kidd was "willing to go a prisoner." The Governor replied, however, that he "could hearken to no such proposition." He had previously, according to his own statement, bidden the jailer "to try if he could prevail with him [Capt. Kidd] to discover where his treasure was hid by him; but he said nobody could find it but himself, and would not tell any further." Yet in the deposition submitted to Bellomont and his council, the Captain had distinctly stated that "the said ship was left at St. Katherina, on the southwest part of Hispaniola, about three leagues to leeward of the westerly end of Savona."

Absurd and conflicting rumors of Kidd's doings continued to reach England even after his long voyage had ended. Thus, a month later than his arrival, according to Luttrell's "Brief Relation of State Affairs," he was reported to have been "taken prisoner by a French ship, the commander of which had sent him in irons to the Great Mogul," from whose subjects he had taken, in the Quedah, goods "to the value of £400,000." The same chronicler put the value of Kidd's jewels at £30,000 and all of his effects when he reached America at £200,000. Three days later (August 3), it is recorded: "We now have letters from the West Indies which contradict the taking of Capt. Kidd, the pirate, and say that after the Adventure Galley was sunk he went on board a Portuguese and sailed directly for Darien, where the Scots received him and all his riches." Again, two days afterward: "Capt. Kidd, . . . we now hear, was at Nassau Island (Long Island), near New York, and sent for Mr. Livingston . . . and proffered £30,000 to give the owners who first fitted out the Adventure Galley and £20,000 for his pardon." Twelve days later we read:

Letters from Curassau (Curacao) say that the famous pirate Capt. Kidd, in a ship of 30 guns and 250 men, offered the Dutch Governor of St. Thomas 45,000 pieces of eight in gold and a great present of goods if he would protect him a month, which he refused.

It was not till August 22—nearly eight weeks after the event—that authentic word reached London that Kidd had surrendered himself to Lord Bellomont. So long as a century and a half afterward Lord Chancellor Campbell wrote that, having "cruised against the commerce of all nations indiscriminately, . . . after a sharp engagement with an English frigate, in which several fell on both sides, he was captured and brought home in irons!"

Nearly a year elapsed before Bellomont sent his prisoner to England for trial, piracy not being a capital offense in America, and yet another year slipped away before he was actually tried, condemned and hanged for murder and piracy—not because he was guilty of those crimes, which he was not, but as a scapegoat for Lord Chancellor Somers and the other grandees who were his partners in his last voyage—one of whom was Bellomont himself and another the King of England.



Captain Kidd burns his Bible.

(From the Pirate's Own Book)

do so. The gold, Kidd told him, was intended for Lord Bellomont. Two of Kidd's men thereupon delivered to the visitor "gold and gold dust of about one pound, to keep for him (Kidd), and did present to Gardiner a sash and a pair of worsted stockings." He then "steered for Boston."

Gardiner "knew nothing of Kidd's being a pirate, and if he had he durst not have acted otherwise," having no force to oppose him. He had "formerly been threatened to be killed by privateers if he should carry unkindly to them." While the sloop St. Anthony lay off Block Island, he declared, Kidd had put several bales of goods and other things on board of certain sloops which had sailed in the direction of New York. From his sworn testimony it appears that he and Kidd got on famously together and parted on the best of terms, the Captain very civilly firing a salute when his guest departed.

This is the true story of Capt. Kidd's visit to Gardiner's Island, and the only one having the slightest claim to credence. But nothing concerning this ill-fated man has escaped perversion, and the simple facts narrated by Gardiner have been ruthlessly garbled to bring them into harmony with the man's evil reputation.

Gardiner's deposition was among the papers relating to Kidd which Gov. Bellomont sent to England for use at his trial

when transmitted for a few generations by word of mouth.

He [Kidd] took what fresh provisions he wanted; came in the night and cut the old gentleman's hands with his cutlass; destroyed feather beds; scattered the paper money about the house; stayed several days and lived well; tied the old man up to a mulberry tree, which is now standing at the north house; left money, &c., with him. It was hid in a swampy place at Cherry Harbor. He showed Mr. John where he put it; told him if he [Kidd] never came for it he might have it, but if he called for it and it was gone he would take his head, or his son's.

In Thompson's "History of Long Island" is printed a letter from a female descendant of Gardiner's, who alleges that her great-grandmother, the third proprietor's wife, roasted a pig for Kidd at his request, and that her guest was so pleased with it that he presented her with a piece of silk, which in the course of time seems to have been metamorphosed into "a small piece—a sample—of cloth of gold."

In reading this rubbish one must remember that Kidd never landed upon the island. Whenever he had occasion to deal with the owner he summoned him to the deck of his sloop and there transacted the business in hand. Gardiner, be it said in passing, had the reputation of being a good fellow, who worked hard, made money and improved his insular domain. He mar-



Seventeenth century pirates in carousal.

(From the Pirate's Own Book)